THE CRITICAL THEORY: ITS NATURE AND APPLICATION IN LITERATURE

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Abstract

The critical theory and its practice have often been regarded as a difficult areas in the field of literature for many scholars and researchers. This paper attempts to explain some reasons behind such attitude. It also attempts to explain the nature and meaning of the theory, its tasks, its basic tenets and its application in literature.

Moreover, English literature syllabuses urge students to show a personal response, critical sense and independent judgment through understanding of a text. Nevertheless, some have the sense of fear of that under the pressure of replication the received words or analysis of their teachers.

The aim of this paper is also to clear doubts of difficulty of the theory and its application in literature to be easily approached. Moreover, it may create interest for some scholars and readers for further readings in the same field.

الملخص باللغة العربية

النظرية النقديه ماهيتها ومدى تطبيقها في الادب

تعتبر النظريه النقديه مجال تخصصي صعب في ميدان الادب لكثير من الباحثين والمهتمين بهذا الاختصاص. سنحاول في بحثنا هذا ان نوضح الاسباب وراء ذلك وكذلك سنتطرق لماهية ومعنى النظريه ،مهامها وتطبيقها في مجال الادب. يهدف البحث لتبديد الشكوك حول صعوبة فهم النظريه النقديه وتطبيقها على أي نص ادبي بغية التحليل والتقييم. ومن ناحية اخرى سيوفر البحث فرصة لاثارة القراء والباحثين للاهتمام بهكذا مواضيع لحيويتها واهميتها ضمن اختصاص الادب الانكليزي المعاصر.

What Is Critical Theory ?

There is a common reaction we can notice among scholars or researchers when you mention the concept of criticism or the critical theory and its application in front of them. This reaction reflects a sense of feeling that it is a difficult and seems to be uncommunicative subject. This sense comes out due to the nature of the critical theory which based on being intellectual and argumentative. It involves learning very basic ideas and their application to a variety of literary terms. Having such competence may lead to master logical practical criticism. Abdulla states "literary criticism is that branch of literary study which is concerned with studying, comparing, evaluating and judging literary works. This means that literary criticism helps un understand literature better and also helps us evaluate literary texts."[1] Tilak also emphasizes that "criticism is the play of the mind on a work of literature, and its function is to examine its excellences and defects, and finally to evaluate its artistic worth."[2]

But the sense of making this field difficult is not true only with this discipline. All other disciplines require great efforts to learn their basics. Therefore, this is an unavoidable reason and many scholars have to go through it. It is said by predecessors that the finest metal has to go through the hottest

fire. On the other hand, the desire and devotion to learn something new will certainly reward any one with great insights.

Nevertheless, still there are other reasons that seem to make the subject difficult:

1. We do not have training into the basics of criticism and its theory. This involves developing independent thinking, analytical ability and logic. We simply feed the given material / data to our memory under the title of study. Thereby, we are neither able to think differently nor present our views logically.
2. We are often one-sided and narrow in our approach. We study the prescribed units in isolation maintaining singular and rigid attitude. We are not interdisciplinary in our syllabus, in teaching and learning methods and our evaluative measures.

This may be practically difficult but this has seriously affected negatively our thinking process and analytical ability. We do not understand that our study of a topic is a multi-dimensional exercise. It has many cross-references, and implications and as soon as we deal with it, many levels of meaning become active at a given time. You can not restrict any topic to its disciplinary boundary; it draws on many factors that you should be alert to receive. We hardly do this in our education set-up.

3. We do not achieve adequate level of clarity about the topic that we learn, teach or study for the sake of research. In the case of criticism or theory,

clarity about concepts is very important which we hardly achieve at any level of our study especially in B. A. level of English language and literature.

4. In the contemporary critical texts, we come across specialized language. It is full of the terms that we hardly know. Think of the use of the terms like: eco-criticism, superstructure, new Marxist theorists, nonpositivist sociology … etc. We have often come across these terms in our study of literature and language in early stages of learning this field of specialization. Naturally, this will absolutely block our understanding and interpreting of a given text.

On the other hand, we have to know what does "theory" mean? the answer will help us know what does critical theory in literary studies mean? roughly speaking it is a mixture of many disciplines like sociology, psychology, philosophy, politics, and linguistics. Such mixture works as a mode of analysis. Notice, the point here that theory rejects the idea of a singular and pure discipline. You cannot study any topic within its disciplinary boundary but study where it overlaps with other discipline(s). The immediate consequence of this is that the ideas of originality and particularity are dismissed. Now, we may give a question: How long can we go like this? It is endless so let me venture to put its nature:

A- Theory favors mixing, tries to reveal overlapping and sees everything in terms of network. This is an interdisciplinary approach.

B- It is argumentative and speculative in nature. It tries to bring out the element involved in its investigation.

C- It dismisses any given idea, any pre-assumed notion. For example the idea of the author. As a matter of common sense, we believe that the author is the creator of his work, the source of meaning. But theory suspends this belief and shows that the author only assembles the material that already exists.

D- Theory reverses the classical order of things. It shows that the foundation on which an order is based is itself not fixed, stable and permanent. For example, the classical notion of the difference between nature and culture. We understand culture in opposition with nature. But theory shows that culture has all the features of nature.[3]

E- Theory is something like thinking about thinking. It analyses a set of basic ideas that we use to understand a work, a system. For example, the meaning of a literary work. Theory questions the method that we follow to know the meaning of a work.

After this attempt at knowing the nature and meaning of theory, I think it is time now to know something related to our concern of this paper so as to

provide a clear perspective about. A question may come up to clarify our intention here: when did it begin? For our convenience and understanding, let us divide theory into two broad phases: the structural and the post structural phase. Theory, in its contemporary form, began with the rise of Russian Formalism. Formalism raised the point of the specificity(particular quality) of literature. It branched out into the British Practical Criticism and the American New Criticism. But the major theoretical breakthrough was provided by Ferdinand de Saussure's, structural linguistics.[4] It provided a completely different framework for the study of language and other disciplines. Saussure argued that any system works on its underlying principles and our job is to know those principles. The second phase begins with Derrida's deconstruction. Deconstruction is as much against the classical view of language as Structuralism is, but Derrida finds Saussue's Structuralism as the part of the same classical view of language that he set out to dismiss. With Deconstruction we come full circle with theory. There are other equally heavy versions of theory but we do not have space and scope enough to touch upon them.

We have noticed that in this move of theory, language is the key area. Contemporary linguistic ideas have provided framework to practically all version of theory. Like other disciplines we come to literature through and in language. And here we come to the application of theory to literature. I think if we briefly observe the effects of theory on the consideration of literature, we will learn something about its application to literature:

1- Theory probes into the question: what is literature? This is a huge question that can be responded to in many different ways. In short, theory challenges and redefines the nature, elements, qualities and functions of literature.

2- In theory, literature is just another text. The distinction between literary and non-literary writing has been erased. Any special value to literary texts is denied.[5]

3- The traditional humanistic and historical notions have been rejected. The idea of the author as the source of the literary text and its meaning, the determinacy of meaning, the literary text as the true record of human experience are some major humanistic notions that theory rejects. Contrary to the traditional priority given to the writer, theory brings the reader into play.

What can we make of all these huge claims that theory makes over literature? We think that it is better to re-examine our belief. We need to learn some new things: what we take as true and permanent in literature is not likewise; what we take as central and important in literature can be marginal. Positions and perspectives have been changed.

The final enquiry perhaps is: how far theory helps to understand literary works. This question compels you to offer a long, justifying and at times polemical answer. However, we should acknowledge the fact that theory has

made us aware of the inherent paradoxes in our notions. It has made us alert to the subtleties and has invited us to follow new methods to study literature.

To end our discussion with a conclusion, we may suggest a definition to the critical theory as far as the literary studies are concerned. The critical theory is a form of knowledge via interpretation to understand the meaning of human texts and symbolic expressions; including the interpretation of texts which are themselves implicitly or explicitly the interpretation of other texts or experiences. The ultimate goal of this theory is to transform our present society into a just, rational, humane, and reconciled society. It has several basic tasks and some of them are:

*To promote a diversified education for all individuals in order to steer them away from over-specialization. This will create individuals with strong mental faculties who will be able to think critically about the forces that affect their daily lives. "a part from its aesthetic and pleasing qualities" Mathew Arnold states "literature also had important thing to teach us."[6]

*To promote revolution against all forms of discrimination including those based on sex, race, religious belief …etc.

*To preserve the good moral values that promote universal solidity and will help bring about a more rational and reconciled society.

Thereupon, there is no need to go in depth dealing with words and concepts of literary terms or certain big names of critics and schools of isms. This may lead the audience feeling lost. The scope of knowledge must not go

beyond certain limits as we shed light on it. This will help all to approach any text of literature easily and interestingly. "Our responses, to a literary text through a theory, can sometimes tell us a great deal about ourselves as human beings."[7]

Is this all about the critical theory and if so why there has been so much of fuss? Of course not, this is a bare introduction of it, an attempt to make it understandable. A vast region lies ahead and it invites us.[8]

End Notes

1- Adnan Abdulla, **History of Literary Criticism**, (Mosul: University of Mosul, 1988) p.7.

2- Raghukul Tilak, **History and Principles of Literary Criticism** , (New Delhi: Rama Brothers, 2008) p.1.

3- S. William and Paris Jeffrey (eds.), **New Critical Theory**, (Lantham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002) p. 3.

4- John Sturrock, (2003) **Structuralism**: Second Edition. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing:2003) p. 74.

5- Walter Jensen, **Defining the Critical Theory**. Retrieved on 23rd of Dec. 2011. http;//www127. pair.com/critical/d-ct.htm.

6- Hans Bertens**, Literary Theory: The basics**,(Abingdon: Routledge,2001)p.1.

7- Lindy Miller, **Mastering Practical Criticism**, (Great Britain: Wales, 2001) p.5.

8- On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism

* For further and more details about this area, kindly access the following useful e book: Keith Green and Jill Lebihan ***Critical Theory and Practice***. Taylor and Francis e —Library 2001.

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